

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

09 March 2009

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Stancliffe, C. E. (2005) 'Religion and society in Ireland.', in The new Cambridge medieval history c.500–c.700. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 397–425. The new Cambridge medieval history. (1).

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521362917>

Publisher's copyright statement:

© Cambridge University Press 2005

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN
IRELAND*Clare Stancliffe*

SOCIETY, RELIGION AND THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity had originally spread westwards within the Roman Empire via the mosaic of cities around the Mediterranean; but Ireland lay outside that empire and had an entirely rural society, with no cities or even small towns, no urban lower and middle classes, no coinage, no mass production of goods, and very little trade. The Roman Empire was a hierarchically organised state, with an emperor at the top, and regular subdivisions down the geographical scale to the level of provinces, and within those provinces, the cities with their dependent territories. Ireland, however, was not unified politically; and although the highest-ranking overkings might have their overlordship recognised across an extensive area, this rested on recognition given by the kings of the many individual tribes or *túatha* (singular *túath*).¹ These little *túatha* were the basic political entities, and people had no rights in another *túath* unless (as often happened) there was an agreement between that and their own *túath*.

Although different from the late Roman Empire, however, early Irish society was in many respects comparable with other early medieval societies. The basic unit was not the individual, but the kin group. This would be held responsible for the wrong-doing of one of its members, and for their protection. Besides its peace-keeping role, the kindred was also of fundamental importance in that most agricultural land was 'kin-land': although it could be farmed on an individual basis, it could not be granted away from the kin group, except with its consent.² In addition to an individual's blood relations, close bonds were formed through the widespread custom of fosterage.³ As for the position of women, Irish society was strongly patriarchal: women were generally under the authority of their father, husband or son, and had limited scope for independent action.⁴

¹ Cf. Charles-Edwards (1989), pp. 34–9. See Davies, chapter 9 above.

² Kelly (1988), pp. 100–2. ³ Kelly (1988), pp. 86–90. ⁴ Cf. Kelly (1988), pp. 68–79, 104–5.

Irish society was hierarchical, and the law tracts list several different ranks, each with its own honour price. The basic structure was that of kings, lords, and ordinary freemen, all of whom were free and had their own legal independence. Beneath them were the half-free, and, at the very bottom, slaves. In Ireland, however, a distinctive feature was that kings and nobles were not the only privileged groups. There was also an important class of professionals, people who owed their privileged status to their learning or skill. A Munster law tract differentiates between 'noble' and 'dependent' men of skill.⁵ It includes brehons (lawyers), physicians, smiths, craftsmen, harpists, charioteers, and jugglers amongst the latter. The poets alone ranked as 'noble' men of skill, and their most accomplished practitioners enjoyed the same honour price as the *túath* king.⁶ They also had freedom to travel between the various *túatha* – a privilege which was perhaps shared by the brehons, but which set them apart from ordinary nobles, or even kings.⁷ Thanks to this, Ireland enjoyed a high degree of cultural cohesion, and a consciousness of itself as a whole, despite its political fragmentation.

The translation 'poets', for the Irish *filid* (singular *fili*), is misleadingly inadequate. The word *filid* is etymologically linked to words meaning 'seeing' and 'seer', and the *filid* inherited both the status and many of the functions of the pagan druids. Each king had his own court poet to enhance his standing with praise poems and to act as the chief disseminator of propaganda in his favour. The *fili* also knew an impressive number of tales, and was the repository of genealogical lore, historical traditions and place-name stories.⁸ Once Christianity had become accepted in society in the sixth century, there was much interaction between the new Latin learning that was introduced in its wake, and the native learning of the *filid* and brehons.⁹ This began as early as c.600, and produced an extensive quantity of vernacular material of types that are uncommon or unknown elsewhere in western Europe. Most of this belongs after our period; but we should be aware of the important role which the *filid* and brehons played both in early Irish society and equally in their shaping of many of the sources through which we learn about that society.

In the Christian period in which the law texts were written down, the druids were counted at best only amongst the 'dependent' men of skill; but all the indications are that they had once enjoyed the privileged status that later

⁵ *Uraicecht Becc* 6, 37, trans. MacNeill (1921–4), pp. 273, 277.

⁶ *Uraicecht Becc* 37–8; 16, 20, trans. MacNeill (1921–4), pp. 277, 275; cf. *Bretha Nemed Toisech* 17, trans. Breatnach (1989), pp. 17, 37.

⁷ Kelly (1988), pp. 4–5, 46. ⁸ Byrne (1973), pp. 13–16; Kelly (1988), pp. 43–9.

⁹ Cf. Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen (1984); McCone (1990), chs. 1–2, esp. pp. 1, 22–8; Charles-Edwards (1998), esp. pp. 70–5.

belonged to the *filid*.¹⁰ The druids originally formed a pagan priesthood, and although they were too closely linked to pagan rites to retain their high status, they continued to exist right through the period that concerns us. A seventh-century author found it necessary to warn kings against listening to them,¹¹ and their spells continued to be feared even when Christianity had become dominant. Such fears may have been partially responsible for prompting the Christian *Lorica* or 'Breastplate' prayers as a means of protection.¹²

We can learn about the primal, 'pagan' religion of Ireland only indirectly, but it would appear to have been all-pervasive: there were mountains and rivers which bore the name of a goddess, like the Paps of Anu or the rivers Shannon and Boyne. There were sacred trees and wells.¹³ Tribes traced their descent back to Lug or another deity,¹⁴ and kingship was sacral. Kings would regularly summon an assembly (*óenach*) where their people would come together to transact public business, for economic exchange, and for horse racing and other sports. These assemblies, generally held at an ancient burial ground, appear originally to have had a religious as well as a practical significance. Those of the Uí Néill, held at Teltown, and of the Leinstermen, held at Carman, took place at the festival of Lughnasad, which marked the beginning of harvest, and was named after the god Lug. Samain (1 November), Imbolc (1 February), Beltaine (1 May) and Lughnasad (1 August) were the four major festivals of the pagan year.¹⁵ All this means that the 'religious' aspect of pre-Christian Irish society cannot be separated out: the land people lived in, the calendar of the year's cycle, the king who was the focal point of their very existence as a distinct *túath*, and the assemblies where they met – all these had a religious significance. It follows that conversion to another religion would require a complex set of adjustments.

By AD 500, it is likely that Christianity had been preached throughout Ireland,¹⁶ but far from certain that it had yet been embraced by a majority of the population. The first Christian bishop in Ireland was a continental churchman, Palladius, who was sent 'to the Irish believing in Christ' in 431 by Pope Celestine. Christianity had presumably spread to Ireland in casual ways: chiefly, we may surmise, through links with Britain. Palladius' mission, probably to Leinster (then embracing central eastern as well as south-east Ireland), was portrayed as a success in Rome; and Columbanus, a Leinsterman

¹⁰ *Uraicecht Becc* 37, trans. MacNeill (1921–4), p. 277; cf. *Bretha Crólige* 51, trans. Binchy (1934), pp. 40–1; Mac Cana (1979), esp. pp. 445–6, 456–60; Standcliffe (1980), pp. 78–83.

¹¹ *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*, p. 51.

¹² For example the eighth-century 'Breastplate' ascribed to St Patrick: Greene and O'Connor (1967), pp. 27–32. See also *Hisperica Famina* II, pp. 23–31; Kelly (1988), p. 60.

¹³ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, cc. 39 and 51, 1; Low (1996).

¹⁴ Binchy (1958); M. MacNeill (1982), esp. I, pp. 1–11, 287–349.

¹⁵ E. MacNeill (1921, 1981), pp. 46–57.

¹⁶ Patrick, *Confessio* 34.

writing c.600, could still recall that Ireland had received its Christianity from the pope.¹⁷

The other fifth-century missionary to Ireland who is known by name is the Briton, Patrick. His mission was later than that of Palladius, and was arguably to the northern half of Ireland.¹⁸ Armagh, which later claimed that it was his principal church, was probably just one of his foundations, and one scholar has contested even that.¹⁹ Patrick makes no explicit reference to Palladius, and it is impossible to say whether he had any link with the earlier mission or not. Fortunately two of Patrick's own writings survive, a letter, and his *Confession*. These vividly portray the problems and the dangers of missionary work in fifth-century Ireland. As a foreigner, with no kin at hand to protect him, Patrick found himself despised by the Irish, and compelled to cultivate the goodwill of the powerful in order to remain free to travel and to preach: kings were able to grant protection to outsiders (as were other classes, but only for brief periods). Hence we find Patrick giving gifts to kings and to judges (brehons?); he also paid for a retinue of kings' sons to accompany him. For all that, he was frequently attacked, and in peril of death.²⁰ Patrick succeeded in converting 'many thousands', including both children of kings and slave women.²¹ The conversion of Ireland, however, was a slow process: a missionary would have had to work *túath* by *túath*. He would have gone to the king and to the nobles and privileged classes for support (though Patrick certainly did not restrict his work to these classes); but Irish kings, even if favourable, had no sweeping powers to abolish paganism, while the druids were probably in a position to present a coherent and forceful opposition.²² In addition, the earliest missionaries do not seem to have been adequately supported from abroad: the papacy seems not to have maintained contact with Palladius' mission, while Patrick was apparently operating in the face of opposition from at least some in Britain – though he also drew some financial support from there.²³ In time, however, Patrick's mission bore fruit: as well as his Irish converts, including native boys whom he trained for the priesthood, he inspired some Britons to follow him. Only one of these, Mauchteus of Louth, is known by name; but extensive British involvement in the fifth- and sixth-century Irish church can be deduced from the fact that the Irish acquired their Latin from British speakers.²⁴

¹⁷ Charles-Edwards (1993a), pp. 1–10; Columbanus, *Epistulae* v.3.

¹⁸ Stancliffe (2004). ¹⁹ Doherty (1991), pp. 71–3; cf. Sharpe (1982).

²⁰ Patrick, *Confessio* 21, 35, 37, 51–3, 55; and *Epistola* 1, 10; Charles-Edwards (1976), esp. pp. 54–5.

²¹ Cf. Myrum (1992), p. 44. ²² Stancliffe (1980), esp. pp. 63–7, 77–92.

²³ Patrick, *Confessio* 45–54, and cf. 13 and 26; Stancliffe (2004).

²⁴ Patrick, *Epistola* 3, and *Confessio* 50–1; Sharpe (1990); Greene (1968); McManus (1984); Dumville (1984c), pp. 19–20; Stevenson (1989), pp. 144–7; Dumville *et al.* (1993), pp. 133–45.

In Ireland, paganism was so strongly entrenched that Christianity had to struggle for well over a century before winning formal acceptance. Obviously individual kings and kindreds will have been converted at different rates. But since the privileged classes represented by the druids, *filid* and brehons maintained broadly the same body of teaching and laws throughout Ireland, we may take the inclusion of the Christian church and clergy within their social and legal framework as marking the definitive acceptance of Christianity. The earliest canonical legislation from Ireland, that of the so-called 'First Synod of Patrick', portrays the Christians still as a group within the surrounding pagan society: they are to take disputes to the church, and not to a judge for settlement; they must not, like pagans, swear an oath before a druid (*aruspex*); and the church is prohibited from receiving alms donated by pagan kindreds. The latter may allude to those wishing to keep a foot in both pagan and Christian camps simultaneously;²⁵ but, given the role played by gift exchange in early Irish society, it implies 'a separation of each *túath* into two societies, one Christian, the other pagan'.²⁶ Although these canons cannot be accurately dated, the arguments for assigning them to the first half of the sixth century are strong.²⁷ The continuance of pagan traditions in the sixth century also appears in the annalistic record that the southern Uí Néill overking, Diarmait son of Cerball, celebrated the 'feast of Tara' c.560. This was a pagan inauguration rite for the Uí Néill overkings; and although Diarmait was probably not untouched by Christianity, it suggests that it had not yet won a firm hold.²⁸ In contrast Columba, from the rival, northern branch of the Uí Néill, was founding the monastery of Iona in 563, and late legends portray him as the protector of the *filid*. Although their historicity is unverifiable, the indications are that by his death in 597 the church – or at least, the Ionan church – had come to an understanding with the *filid*. This is implied by the fact that one of their number, by tradition Dallán Forgaill, composed a poetic lament on his death. The text of this poem, in difficult, archaic, Irish, still survives.²⁹

Such evidence as we have therefore points to the second half of the sixth century as the time when Christianity won general acceptance as the religion of Ireland. When the law tracts were written in the seventh and eighth centuries, the clergy were included among the privileged classes, alongside the poets.³⁰

²⁵ *First Synod of St Patrick* 21, 14, 13. Cf. the latter with *Apigitir Chrábaid* 19.

²⁶ Charles-Edwards (1976), p. 56.

²⁷ Hughes (1966), pp. 44–50, also Dumville *et al.* (1993), pp. 175–8.

²⁸ *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 558, 560, and cf. 561; Binchy (1958), pp. 132–8; Byrne (1973), pp. 94–104; cf. Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 294.

²⁹ Most accessibly in Clancy and Márkus (1995), pp. 96–128; also Stokes (1899); note also Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.42. See Herbert (1988), pp. 9–12; Sharpe (1995), pp. 89–90, 312–14.

³⁰ See below, pp. 417–18.

Meanwhile the druids were demoted, although, as we have seen, they did not disappear. Nor, interestingly, did bands of men engaged in *diberg*, which appears to have been a pagan, ritualised practice which involved a group of (typically) nine men taking an oath to kill.³¹ Thus active paganism persisted right through the seventh century, though probably as very much a minority affair.

Besides this 'hard' paganism, explicitly opposed to Christianity, several 'soft' pagan figures or practices survived, frequently in Christian guise. Well-known examples are that of Brigit, who appears to have metamorphosed from pagan goddess into Christian saint; of the holy wells, which were now put under the patronage of a saint; and of the celebrations connected with Lughnasad (probably including pilgrimage up Croagh Patrick), where the figure of St Patrick appears to have taken the place of the Celtic god Lug.³² Alongside these we might note the continuance into modern times of belief in the fairies, who were none other than former pagan deities.³³ Such instances of accommodation were already well under way in the seventh century. Meanwhile the whole question of trying to harmonise biblical teaching and Irish social norms was much discussed in the seventh century. One party, the *Romani* or Roman party, tried to bring Ireland into line with the teaching of the continental church, whereas the Irish party sought – by deft appeal to the Old Testament – to justify the retention of traditional Irish customs such as polygamy and the marriage of first cousins.³⁴

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH AND OF MONASTERIES

We have little evidence for the nature of the church first established in Ireland. Patrick's own writings suggest that he had no fixed see.³⁵ He was probably the only bishop responsible for scattered congregations in the northern half of Ireland, and travelled between them.³⁶ He had native Irish clergy, and he fostered the monastic vocation amongst virgins and monks; but the conditions under which he laboured render it highly unlikely that he was in a position to plan an organisation for a church which was only then coming to birth.³⁷

Our next evidence is the decrees of the 'First Synod of Patrick', already discussed. These imply that a bishop was in charge of each *plebs*, a Latin

³¹ Sharpe (1979), esp. pp. 82–92. Was their victim regarded as a sacrifice to the deities? Cf. Ellis Davidson (1988), pp. 58–82.

³² Kenney (1929), pp. 356–8; Ó Catháin (1999); Logan (1980); M. MacNeill (1982).

³³ Cf. Tírechán, *Collectanea* 26.3; Danaher (1972), pp. 121–2, 207; Mac Cana (1986), pp. 66–7, 72–4.

³⁴ *Bretha Cróige* 57; Ó Corráin (1984), pp. 157–61. On *Romani* and the Irish party, see below.

³⁵ Patrick, *Epistola* 1. ³⁶ Cf. Patrick, *Confessio* 43, 51; Thompson (1985), pp. 148–9.

³⁷ Sharpe (1984b), pp. 239–42.

word meaning 'people', which here almost certainly denotes the Irish *túath*.³⁸ Later documentation confirms the norm of each *túath* having its own (chief) bishop.³⁹ This implies well over a hundred dioceses in Ireland, so by north European standards each Irish bishop ruled a tiny diocese. It has been plausibly argued that a *Domnach Mór* ('Donaghmore') type place-name, followed by the name of a population group, represents the chief or 'mother' church of that people: one that would have had a bishop. The same probably also went for names formed from *cell* plus the name of a population group. What is particularly interesting about the *domnach* names is that because this word for church had fallen out of use by the mid-sixth century, a map of *domnach* place-names (Map 9) records churches probably founded before c.550 – albeit with no pretence at completeness.⁴⁰ The relatively dense cluster of such names near the centre of the east coast is particularly interesting as it coincides with the area associated with Auxilius, Secundinus and Iserninus, fifth-century missionaries who probably formed part of Palladius' mission.⁴¹

The role of monasticism in the early Irish church is a question of considerable interest. Patrick had introduced monastic ideals, and his writings show that many individuals became monks and virgins. The latter were drawn from both the highest and the lowest classes in society and endured much persecution. It appears, however, that the virgins were living at home, rather than in separate establishments. Less evidence is available on the monks, but they may have served as celibate clergy, perhaps living in clerical-monastic communities rather than in monasteries that were sharply cut off from ordinary society.⁴² In the early stages of conversion there was probably a need for clerical manpower, as also a lack of landed endowments of sufficient size to enable the establishment of separate monasteries.

Those to whom a later age looked back as the founder-saints of the famous monasteries in Ireland generally have obits falling between 537 and 637 in the Irish annals. One might instance Cíarán, founder of Clonmacnois on the Shannon, and Finnian, founder of Clonard, also in the midlands, both recorded as dying (probably prematurely) of plague in 549; Comgall, founder of the austere monastery of Bangor on Belfast Lough, where Columbanus was trained, and Columba (or Colum Cille), the founder of Derry, Durrow (in the

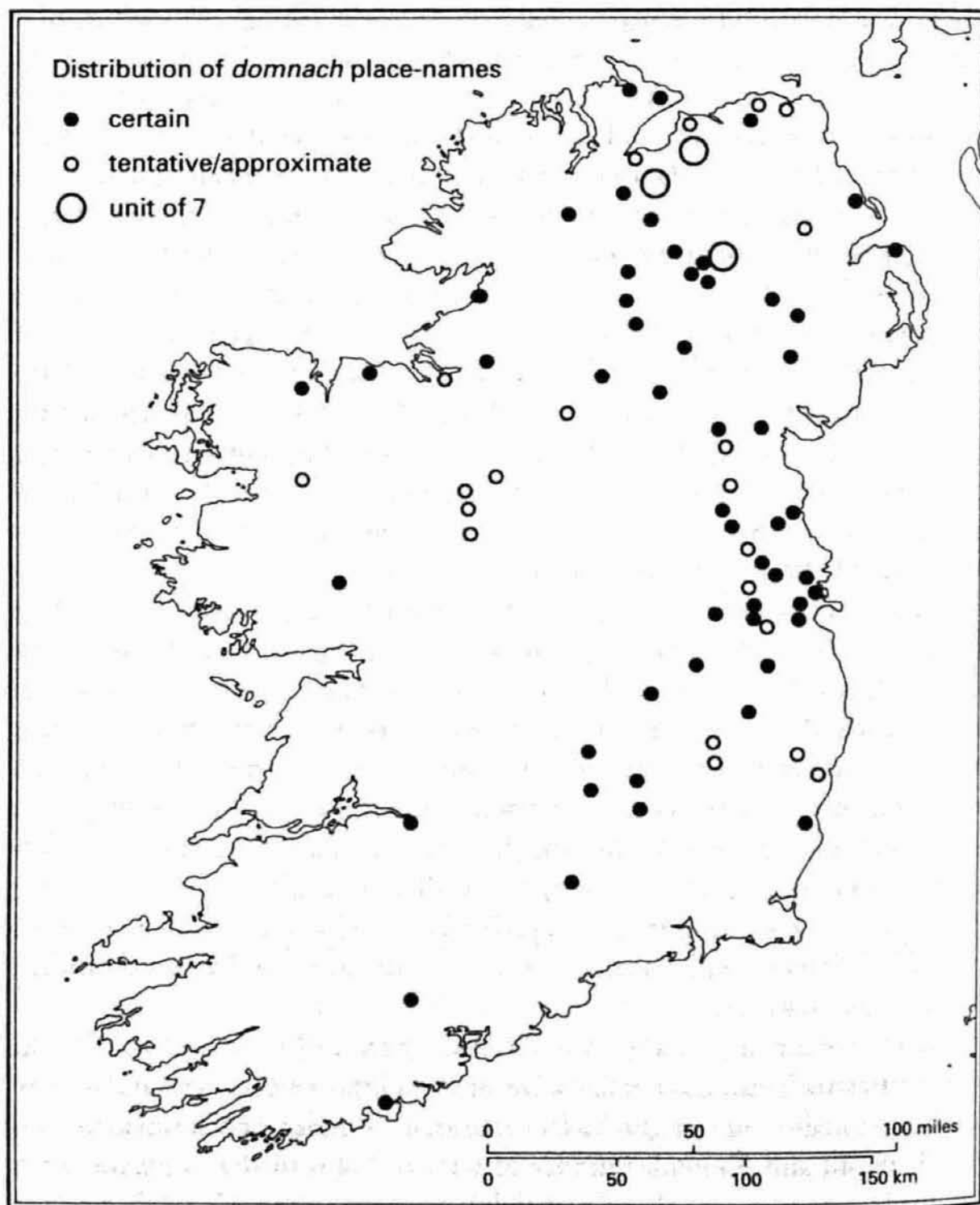
³⁸ *First Synod of St Patrick* 1, 3–5, 23–30; Hughes (1966), pp. 44–51, esp. 50; Charles-Edwards (1993b), pp. 138–9, 143–7.

³⁹ 'Rule of Patrick' 1–3, 6; *Críth Gablach* 47, trans. MacNeill (1921–4), p. 306; Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 248. Complications are discussed by Etchingham (1999), pp. 141–8.

⁴⁰ Flanagan (1984), pp. 25–34, 43–7; Ó Corráin (1981), p. 338; Sharpe (1984b), pp. 256–7; (1992a), pp. 93–5.

⁴¹ Dumville *et al.* (1993), pp. 51–3, 89–98; cf. Hughes (1966), p. 68 and map at end.

⁴² Herren (1989), esp. p. 83; Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 224–6.



Map 9 Distribution of *domnach* place-names (after Flanagan, in Ní Chatháin and Richter (1984), map 5)

midlands) and Iona (in Scotland); Kevin, the founder of Glendalough in the Wicklow Mountains, and Carthach, founder of Lismore in Munster, just up the Blackwater from the south coast (Map 10); and that is to name just some of the most famous. The implication of this annalistic evidence, that this period saw a current of enthusiasm for the monastic life, is corroborated by Columbanus, writing c.600. He mentions the problem of monks who, desiring

a stricter life, abandon the places of their original profession, as an issue on which Finnian had questioned Gildas. Moreover much of Gildas' reply survives, albeit in fragmentary form.⁴³ This evidence implies the existence of established, not too austere, monastic communities, followed by a wave of enthusiasm for a stricter religious life. The latter appears to have developed from c.540 in Ireland under the influence of British enthusiasts for the ascetic life.⁴⁴ Behind this lay the inspiration of Cassian and other Gallic Christians. The religious ideal that inspired them was to cut themselves free from the pressures of ordinary society and cultivate such virtues as detachment, freedom from egoism, and love, so that they could begin to live as citizens of heaven, in communion with the angels and with God himself. To this end, they adopted the common practices of coenobitic monasticism. Many of them learned Latin in order to read the Bible. This opened up to them the works of the church Fathers and some of the intellectual achievements of the ancient world, while the Irish also made their own contribution to learning and culture in both Latin and Old Irish.⁴⁵

Only a small minority within Ireland will have embraced this religious ideal themselves, but it was still of great importance. The example of its most wholehearted adherents will at least have made people aware of a completely different approach to life. This was particularly so when monasticism was embraced by men like Columba, a prince of the Uí Néill – the most powerful royal dynasty in the northern half of Ireland. Many of the most enthusiastic converts to monasticism left their own *túatha* and travelled elsewhere as religious exiles or *peregrini*. This was an attempt to cut free from their roots, to give up everything for the sake of following Christ, 'poor and humble and ever preaching truth'.⁴⁶ Such ascetic renunciation may well have been partly inspired by the immense difficulty of achieving lasting detachment from society while continuing to live in a monastery on home ground where everyone knew one's kin. The *peregrinatio* of Columba from Ireland to Britain in 563 may have occurred for just such reasons.⁴⁷ From a historical viewpoint, the practice of religious *peregrinatio* was significant because it led to the displacement of many of the religiously most committed. Some simply withdrew to inaccessible sites, like the rocky islands off the west coast that are scattered with hermitages. But some went elsewhere within mainland Ireland; some sailed to northern Britain, like Columba; and some followed the more austere path of leaving the

⁴³ Columbanus, *Epistulae* 1.7; Sharpe (1984a), esp. pp. 196–9; Gildas, *Fragmenta*. This Finnian may be a separate individual from the founder of Clonard.

⁴⁴ See Stancliffe, chapter 16 below, pp. 437, 439–41.

⁴⁵ See Fontaine, chapter 27 below; Richter (1999), pp. 137–56.

⁴⁶ Columbanus, *Epistulae* 11.3; see Charles-Edwards (1976); Hughes (1987), no. xiv.

⁴⁷ Cf. Herbert (1988), p. 28; *Vita Sancti Endei* c.6; Stancliffe, chapter 16 below, p. 454 and n. 136.

insular world altogether and emigrating to the continent, like Columbanus, who sailed from Bangor to Francia in 591. Further *peregrini* followed these pioneers, and the whole movement contributed to the Christianisation of northern Britain and to the revival of Christianity in parts of the continent. Columbanus' continental career and his monastic foundations of Luxeuil in Burgundy and Bobbio in Italy were of particular importance since they forged lasting links between Ireland, Francia and Italy, while forcing consideration of how far Irish Christian idiosyncrasies would be tolerated on the continent.⁴⁸

The new monasteries in Ireland itself rapidly attracted both recruits and landed endowments. These institutions helped to secure the future of Christianity in Ireland by becoming thriving educational centres where future monks and priests could be trained, and by producing the biblical and liturgical manuscripts and cultivating the Latin learning which were necessary accessories to Christianity. In theory, the *tíuath* episcopal churches might have done this. In practice, however, they may well have been on too small a scale; and their worthy, but more mundane objective of giving pastoral care probably did not attract recruits of the calibre of Columbanus, who approvingly quoted Jerome to the effect that whereas bishops should imitate the apostles, monks should 'follow the fathers who were perfect'.⁴⁹

Monasticism will also have influenced lay society because much of the pastoral care was performed by monastically trained clerics, who, as in Gaul, sought to impose ascetic norms on the church as a whole. Whereas the 'First Synod of Patrick' appears to have accepted married priests, the sixth-century ascetics insisted on clerical celibacy, and also sought to impose strict monogamy on lay people, together with long periods of sexual abstinence.⁵⁰ Doubtless most lay people took little notice; but tenants of monastic lands were under pressure to conform, and some lay people chose to. They might visit a monastery and stay there for a while, and they might put themselves under the spiritual guidance of a confessor, who would in many cases have been a monk. Regular confession would have allowed much scope for the formation of conscience.⁵¹ The Irish, perhaps following British precedents, were innovating here: they held that even serious sins, such as killing, could be atoned for by repentance, confession and the performance of a penance; and that this could be repeated if need arose. This contrasted with the situation on the continent where the 'public penance' required for serious sins (which included the ubiquitous sin of adultery) was not only public, but also allowed only once in a lifetime. In consequence people were exceedingly reluctant to undertake it before their deathbed – and if they did undertake it, they then had to live the rest of their

⁴⁸ See Fouracre, chapter 14 above.

⁴⁹ Columbanus, *Epistulae* 11.8.

⁵⁰ Finnian, *Penitentialis* 46; Hughes (1966), ch. 5, esp. pp. 42–3, 51–5; cf. Markus (1990), pp. 181–211.

⁵¹ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.32 (cf. Sharpe (1995), p. 293, n. 144), III.7; Frantzen (1983), pp. 8–12, 30–9; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen (1984), pp. 404–5; Etchingham (1999), pp. 290–318.

lives in a quasi-monastic state, lest they sin again; they were not even allowed to resume conjugal relations with their spouses. In contrast the Irish penitential system, where penance could be repeated whenever necessary, left the person who had successfully completed his penance with freedom to return to ordinary life in society.⁵² It is thus likely to have been used more, and Adomnán shows us several penitent sinners seeking out Columba on Iona.⁵³ In these ways there was considerable scope for ascetics influencing Christian norms within Irish society, although we should not assume that they ever represented the only viewpoint in the Irish church: one eighth-century law text implies that it was perfectly acceptable for bishops or priests to have one wife, though their status was lower than those who remained virgins. Thus married clergy, together with more relaxed views of what should be expected of lay people, may well have existed side by side with ascetic ideals right through our period.⁵⁴

THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY AND LAND

If the church were to thrive, it needed endowments. As elsewhere in early medieval Europe, these consisted primarily of land, although people, animals, jewellery and so on were also donated. Gifts were not given to 'the church', as an impersonal institution, but rather to an individual person, whether alive or dead. One common pattern in these centuries was to donate land to the individual religious or cleric who would found a church on it. The churchman thus became the 'founder-saint' of that church – something that helps to explain the numerous dedications to obscure, local saints in Ireland. If a churchman received land for churches at several sites, the churches he founded would be grouped together as a federation under his rule, even if they were widely scattered across Ireland. After his death they would pass under the rule of his 'heir', who was the head of the federation's principal church: normally, where the founder-saint was buried. Modern historians often dub such federations *paruchia*e. Sometimes, particularly in the case of St Patrick or monastic saints, the donation would be made to a dead saint. In that case, it was in effect made to his heir, and it joined the other churches of that saint's federation. As we shall see below, by the later seventh century these federations were also expanding by taking over previously existing churches.

In Irish society, the hereditary principle was so ubiquitous that it was natural for it to apply within the church as well. It is thus common to find the

⁵² Finnian, *Penitentialis* 35; Frantzen (1983), pp. 5–7; O'Loughlin (2000), pp. 49–66. See also Scheibelreiter, chapter 25 below.

⁵³ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.22 and 30, II.39.

⁵⁴ Hughes (1966), p. 135; Etchingham (1999), p. 70; cf. Doherty (1991), p. 65; Cogitosus, *Vita Brigittae* c.32 (AA SS edn. c.viii, 39).

headship of churches being handed down within the family of the founder-saint.⁵⁵ This did not necessarily lead to married lay abbots and a worldly church: Iona is the classic case of a monastery which retained its standards, but where the vast majority of its celibate abbots were of the same Uí Néill family as its founder-saint, Columba, with abbatial succession passing to nephews or cousins. In another instance the nobleman called Fith Fio who founded the church of Drumlease specified that its headship should always go to one of his own kindred, provided someone suitable ('good, devout, and conscientious') could be found.⁵⁶ Continued family interest in a church might also operate on behalf of the *donor's* family – as was natural in a society where the norm was reciprocal gift-giving, rather than the impersonal marketplace. Sometimes the donor simply expected the community's prayers, as with the nobleman from whom Colman bought land at Mayo following his withdrawal to Ireland after the Synod of Whitby (664). The donor's family probably gained burial rights as well, but the receiving church could still retain its effective independence, as with Iona.⁵⁷ However in some, perhaps many, cases, the donor retained a more extensive interest in the church for his own family. Sometimes, as is said to have happened at Trim, the donor gave land to a close relative, so that the family of both donor and church-founder was the same.⁵⁸ In these ways, although the land was donated to the church, it was effectively retained within the family. This was particularly important in Ireland, where normally it was only kings who would have had extensive lands for donating to the church. Irish law forbade the alienation of 'kinland', unless it had the approval of the kin-group as a whole. What is more, the kindred retained the right to reclaim such land for up to fifty years after the donation had been made. A man had more freedom with land that he himself had acquired; but even here, he could only alienate a limited amount.⁵⁹ Donations that retained the family's interest in the church would be more likely to win their approval.

The simplest form of endowment can be seen in the case of Iona. Here, King Conall of Dál Riada donated the island to Columba,⁶⁰ and Adomnán's narrative shows the monks doing their own farming; perhaps there was no (permanently resident) population on the little island at the time of its donation. Sometimes, however, not just a tract of land but also the people living

⁵⁵ Ó Riain (1989), p. 360; Etchingham (1999), pp. 224–8.

⁵⁶ *Additamenta* 9; Doherty (1991), pp. 78–9.

⁵⁷ Bede, *HE* IV.4; Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.8; Macquarrie (1992), pp. 110–14; Sharpe (1995), pp. 16–18, 26–8, 277–8.

⁵⁸ *Additamenta* 1–4. Byrne (1984); cf. Etchingham (1999), pp. 227–8.

⁵⁹ Charles-Edwards (1993b), pp. 67–70; Mac Niocaill (1984), pp. 153–4; Stevenson (1990), pp. 31–2.

⁶⁰ *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 574; cf. Sharpe (1995), pp. 16–18.

and farming it were granted to a church. In this case the population became *manaig* or 'monastic tenants' of that church.⁶¹ *Manaig* (singular, *manach*) is the Old Irish word for 'monks', but *manaig* were like ordinary monks only in the sense that they became members of a church 'family', with the abbot at its head, in lieu of their family head. So, for instance, they could not enter into contracts without his assent. However, they were not subject to his will in the detailed living of their everyday lives, as was normal for ordinary monks. What is more, they continued to live with their wives in their own houses as peasant farmers or warriors much as normal, sometimes at a considerable distance from the church.⁶² Their chief characteristics, apart from their recognition of the abbot's authority, were their subjection to a strict sexual regime (monogamy, and no sexual relations at times such as Lent), their obligation to pay the church certain dues, including tithes and burial payments, and a mutual arrangement whereby one son was educated by the church, but was allowed to marry and inherit his share of the property, which he continued to farm as a *manach*. The *manaig* thus represent one of several ways in which monasteries became intimately bound up with Irish society.

One consequence of the wealth accruing to churches through gifts of land is that secular dynasties became interested in controlling them. Members of royal lineages who failed to achieve kingship might seek headship of a church, while a vulnerable *túath* might find its churches' independence threatened by its political enemies. Such intertwining of ecclesiastical and secular interests became widespread in the eighth century, but was already underway in the second half of the seventh.⁶³

VARIETY WITHIN THE CHURCH

As the preceding discussion suggests, it is not asceticism but variety that is the keynote of the early Irish church. This can best be appreciated by examining individual churches, beginning with Armagh (Map 10). In the seventh century this claimed that it had been Patrick's principal church. This is unlikely; but it may have been one of a number that owed their foundation to him, and archaeology has confirmed fifth-century activity at the bottom of the hill at 'Na Ferta' ('the gravemounds'), which preceded the church settlement on the hilltop.⁶⁴ Armagh's name includes that of the pagan goddess Macha, and its

⁶¹ Doherty (1982); Charles-Edwards (1984).

⁶² There were both 'base' and 'free' *manaig*: cf. Hughes (1966), pp. 136–42; Doherty (1982), pp. 315–18; Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 118.

⁶³ Ó Corráin (1981); Charles-Edwards (1989), p. 36; (1998), pp. 70–4; Doherty (1991), p. 63.

⁶⁴ *Liber Angeli* 1, 7–9, 17; Muirchú, *Vita Patricii* III.6, and II.4 and 6 (pp. 108–12, 116); Hamlin and Lynn (1988), pp. 57–61; Doherty (1991), esp. pp. 72–3; cf. Sharpe (1982).



Map 10 Location of Irish churches named in the text

site lies just 3 kilometres distant from the Emain Macha of legend, a pre-Christian sacral site. Aerial photography and early maps suggest inner and outer enclosures at Armagh, and the seventh-century *Liber Angeli* reveals that Armagh was then a complex ecclesiastical settlement. It had virgins, penitents and married people, who attended a church in the northern area, while bishops, priests, anchorites and other male religious attended a southern church, which boasted extensive relics. Over all, was the self-styled archbishop. There is also

reference to pilgrims, the sick and asylum seekers. Armagh's straitened hilltop site, even with its outlying areas (*suburbana*), was claimed as inadequate for all seeking refuge there.⁶⁵ By the late seventh century Armagh was angling for support from the Uí Néill dynasty, while simultaneously cultivating relations with the Dál Fiatach dynasty of Ulster.⁶⁶

Kildare in Leinster presents a similar picture of outer and inner enclosures,⁶⁷ of a link with the pagan past, of a large, mixed community looking to the church, and of royal interest – this time from the Uí Dúnlainge. One distinctive feature is that Kildare was a double monastery, reputedly founded by St Brigit, and comprising nuns together with a bishop and his male clerics. It was presided over jointly by the abbess and bishop, and by the later seventh century boasted a large wooden church with internal partitions, which enabled the nuns and clerics, and also lay women and men, to worship simultaneously, but shielded from sight of the opposite sex. St Brigit and her first bishop were enshrined either side of the altar, their tombs embellished 'with pendant gold and silver crowns and various images'. Like Armagh, Kildare was a 'city of refuge' or sanctuary, and was also thronged with people seeking abundant feasts or healing, or bringing gifts, or just gawping at the crowds.⁶⁸ The way in which these churches could serve such diverse needs was through internal division of their extensive sites, reserving an inner sanctum just for contemplatives or clerics. A synodical ruling defines the most sacred area as accessible only to clerics (cf. Armagh's southern church); the next area was open to lay people 'not much given to wickedness'; and the outer area was accessible to all, including wrongdoers seeking sanctuary.⁶⁹ Sometimes, as at Armagh and Nendrum, internal divisions can still be traced.⁷⁰

At the opposite extreme from the bustling crowds at Kildare are the remote hermitage sites on coastal islands.⁷¹ Most dramatic of all is Skellig Michael, a great pyramid of rock with two peaks, which rises steeply from the Atlantic some 14 kilometres off the Kerry coast. The main monastic site lies underneath the north-east peak, and consists of two small oratories, six beehive huts, a little graveyard with stone crosses and cross-slabs, and a small garden. At most it would have housed an abbot and twelve monks, serving presumably as a communal hermitage. Life there must always have been very harsh; yet Skellig has another, even more ascetic site. Perched high up on the south peak lies a

⁶⁵ *Liber Angeli* 6, 14–16, 19.

⁶⁶ Muirchú, *Vita Patricii* I.10–12, II.4–14 (pp. 74–81, 116–23); Moisl (1987).

⁶⁷ Swan (1985), pp. 84–9, 98.

⁶⁸ Cogitosus, *Vita Brigitae* c.32 (AA SS edn c.viii, 39). See also Doherty (1985); Ó Corráin (1987), pp. 296–307.

⁶⁹ *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* XLIV.5, c; Doherty (1985), esp. pp. 56–9.

⁷⁰ Herity (1984); Edwards (1990), pp. 105–21. ⁷¹ Herity (1989).

tiny hermitage site with its own oratory, hut and water-collecting basins. To get there at all requires rock climbing.⁷²

The contemplative function of Skellig is clear: it served as 'a desert in the ocean'.⁷³ However not all islands were uninhabited, and not all island churches were contemplative hermitages. Just off the mainland opposite Skellig – or rather, in the channel between the mainland and Beginish – lies the tiny Church Island, which originally had a wooden oratory and hut, later rebuilt in stone. This site probably began as a hermitage, but metamorphosed into a small hereditary church.⁷⁴ 'The Rule of Patrick' shows that each *túath* might be expected to have not just its principal church but also a number of small churches serving the local *manaig*, and cared for by (at most) a single priest.⁷⁵

As regards the principal churches of the *túatha*, these were headed by a bishop, but may have been multifunctional communities from the outset. Tírechán, writing in the late seventh century, represents the first bishop of Cell Toch in Corcu Teimne (west Connacht) together with his sister as 'monks of Patrick', while the more famous church of Aghagower nearby similarly had a bishop and a nun as its founding figures.⁷⁶ During the seventh century these *túath* episcopal churches declined in standing, being overtaken by more recent monastic foundations.⁷⁷ Many were subordinated to these monasteries; for instance, Cell Toch was subordinated to Clonmacnois. Sometimes subordination led to loss of their own bishop, as befell Coleraine in the north-east. Often, however, the church continued to function as an episcopal church, with a bishop overseeing the *túath* as before; but it now owed allegiance – and often tribute – to the superior church. Those churches that entered into association with Armagh retained their episcopal status, as did Aghagower.

Let us turn now to the monasteries like Clonmacnois, Bangor and Iona, which were founded primarily as places for living the monastic life on sites with no previous religious history. As such, they may have differed – at least in their early days – both from the *túath* episcopal churches and also from churches like Armagh and Kildare, which had rights of sanctuary (and, perhaps significantly, were on former pagan sites).⁷⁸ Iona certainly had a different set of priorities

⁷² O'Sullivan and Sheehan (1996), pp. 278–90; Horn, Marshall and Rourke (1990).

⁷³ Cf. p. 459 below. ⁷⁴ Cf. O'Kelly (1958); Ó Corráin (1981), pp. 339–40.

⁷⁵ 'Rule of Patrick', 11–16.

⁷⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, cc.37; 39, 8; 47, 4. These sites lie between Westport Bay and Lough Mask. Herren (1989), p. 83; above, n. 42; Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 225–6.

⁷⁷ Doherty (1991), esp. pp. 60–6, 73–81; Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 55–60, 251–7; below, pp. 418–200.

⁷⁸ Cf. Ó Corráin (1987), pp. 301–3; Clonmacnois and Iona are perhaps examples of those texts' 'apostolic cities'.

from Kildare. It had a guesthouse for visiting pilgrims, but the impression given is that these were people seeking spiritual counsel or wishing to share the religious life for a while, rather than crowds thronging a shrine in expectation of miracles – though this may be due partially to the abbot's perspective, rather than to that of the lay people themselves.⁷⁹ Certainly St Columba's remains were not placed in a special shrine to attract pilgrims; and a Columban monk's worry that lay people would crowd to the island for their patron's funeral was divinely answered by a period of stormy weather, which prevented any but the monks themselves being present.⁸⁰ Iona's island site thus served its desire to remain a place apart, while yet providing good communications by sea. As well as the main monastery on Iona there were subordinate monasteries on other islands, some of which had specialised functions such as catering for penitents or for anchorites; equally, Iona's foundations in populated areas will have become involved in pastoral ministry, as is attested for the Northumbrian daughter houses of Lindisfarne and Melrose.⁸¹ Thus whereas Armagh catered for everyone from anchorites through clergy and lay people to penitents and sanctuary seekers on the one site, Iona itself remained a monastic community, as we would understand it, though the Columban community as a whole fulfilled most of Armagh's functions.

It is possible, however, that Iona was unusual in maintaining its distance from surrounding society. Sites in mainland Ireland will have needed to provide for their *manaig* and for penitents, at least. A legal text indicates that a church in good standing should have a full complement of clerics to provide baptism, communion, mass, prayer for the dead and preaching; it should give hospitality, and include people living the active life, others living the contemplative life, and also people serving a term of penance attached to it.⁸² Another text states succinctly that the three things required of a church are a monk, a student and a penitent.⁸³ This implies a school. Basic schooling was probably quite widely available, but for more advanced studies it would perhaps be necessary to seek out a renowned master or monastic school, as we see with Columbanus leaving his native Leinster to study with Sinilis of Bangor.⁸⁴ Thus by the mid-eighth century most churches of any size in Ireland were probably multifunctional communities; and even those which had started as places for living the monastic life had become so integrated into ordinary secular society that we find them fighting each other, as with Clonmacnois and Durrow in 764.

⁷⁹ Cf. Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.30, 32, 44, with *Amra Choluimb Chille* vi and vii.

⁸⁰ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* III.23.

⁸¹ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.21 and 30, II.39, III.23; Bede, *Vita Cuthberti* cc.9, 15–16; Thacker (1992).

⁸² *Bretha Nemed Toisech* 3, 6, 12; cf. *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* XLII.1.

⁸³ *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* XLII.15.

⁸⁴ Charles-Edwards (1998), pp. 66–7, 74; Ó Cróinín (1982), pp. 283–6 and (1995), pp. 174–89.

Early medieval Ireland thus had different types and sizes of church; by no means all of these were 'monasteries', as we would understand the term. Four points are important in bridging the gap between the early medieval reality and popular misconceptions of it. One of these, about the relative importance of bishops and abbots as church leaders, will be discussed later; the remainder will be noted here. First, appearances can be deceptive: several seemingly remote monasteries in fact lay adjacent to medieval thoroughfares, as did Clonmacnois. Skellig and Iona do indeed represent communal hermitage and coenobitic monastery respectively, but neither was necessarily typical. Secondly, there is the problem of change over time. Church Island, for instance, probably began as a hermitage site, but metamorphosed into a family church. Other hermitages may have developed into full monasteries, as perhaps happened with Glendalough in the Wicklow mountains.⁸⁵ Most important of all is the intriguing development of such monasteries into multifunctional communities, where those living the religious life might shrink to a tiny proportion of the whole church family. How far this development had gone by 700, it is impossible to know. But it is tempting to suggest that when Cogitosus in the mid or late seventh century described Kildare as 'a monastery city (*monasterii civitatis*) as we call it', justifying the term city (despite Kildare's lack of surrounding walls) on the grounds of the innumerable people flocking thither, he was innovating; and that he was innovating to describe a new development.⁸⁶ If so, he was soon followed; and while Adomnán preferred the term *monasterium* (monastery), and early annals kept on Iona used the term *ecclesia* (church), by the eighth century the term *civitas* (city) was creeping into the annals, even for Iona itself.⁸⁷ This may represent no more than a change of annalists; but it may indicate a change from communities focussed primarily on the religious life to more diverse communities where this concern had become that of a minority.

Thirdly, if terminology can help us in this respect, in others it confuses the modern reader. Thus one crucial question is what is meant by the terms 'monk', 'abbot' and 'monastery'. As the 'Rule of Patrick' shows, even a small church served by (at most) one priest would be supported by *manaig*, 'monks', who in effect were monastic tenant-farmers; the head of the church (either a priest, or a layman who would be responsible for providing a priest) would in legal terms be the 'abbot' of these *manaig*, and the church could thus be described as a 'monastery'. On the other hand, there would, in these very small churches, be

⁸⁵ Cf. Oengus, *Féilire Oengusso*, prologue 193, 209; *Vita Sancti Coemgeni* cc.6, 16; 24–5; Henry (1964), pp. 50–1.

⁸⁶ Cogitosus, *Vita Brigittae* c.32 (AA SS edn c.viii, 38).

⁸⁷ *Liber Angeli* 17, 21; MacDonald (1982), and cf. *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 555, 558, 635; MacDonald (1984), pp. 273–81; Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 119.

no one living the monastic life as we understand it.⁸⁸ Thus to say that virtually every church in seventh-century Ireland was a monastery is technically true; but it masks, rather than reveals, the varied nature of the early Irish church, which contained 'monasteries' as integrated into society as Kildare, as remote from society as Skellig, as straightforward as Iona, and as basic as a tiny church with one priest ministering to the surrounding monastic tenants.

THE EASTER CONTROVERSY

Easter, the most important Christian festival, does not fall on a fixed date, and the difficulties of reconciling lunar and solar prescriptions in the calculation of the date led to the emergence of slightly different rules for determining on which Sunday Easter should fall.⁸⁹ In many years, these divergent approaches would still yield the same Sunday; but not always. The British and Irish churches had adopted an eighty-four-year Easter cycle, and assigned Easter to the Sunday that fell between the fourteenth and twentieth days of the relevant lunar month. They apparently based their system on the rules put forward by Anatolius, but as modified by Sulpicius Severus (c.400 AD).⁹⁰ When Columbanus arrived on the continent in 591, however, he found the Frankish church and the papacy using the tables of Victorius of Aquitaine (457 AD). This was an unsatisfactory adaptation of the Alexandrian nineteen-year cycle. Then, around the 630s, the papacy abandoned that in favour of the true Alexandrian (or 'Dionysiac') system, which was eventually to win the day. Although the Victorian and the Alexandrian approaches differed in several important respects, they generally agreed on which Sunday Easter should be celebrated, whereas the eighty-four-year cycle followed by the Britons and the Irish more often yielded divergent dates.

Columbanus encountered opposition to his divergent Easter dates from early on in his continental career, but he resolutely refused to change to the Victorian system, which he judged flawed. After his death, however, his followers at Luxeuil and Bobbio were forced to adopt it.⁹¹ Pope Honorius' acquaintance with Bobbio alerted him to the fact that Ireland as a whole dated Easter according to different criteria, and c.628 he therefore wrote to the Irish on the Easter question, apparently threatening them with excommunication unless they conformed.⁹² This prompted Christians in the southern half of Ireland to discuss the matter in a synod, and then to send a fact-finding mission to Rome. When this reported back c.632 that all the other nationalities present in Rome

⁸⁸ Charles-Edwards (1992), p. 67. ⁸⁹ On all this, see Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 391–415.

⁹⁰ McCarthy (1994). ⁹¹ Stancliffe (2001), esp. pp. 205–8, 213.

⁹² Bede, *HE* II.19; Cummean, *De Controversia Paschali*, pp. 90–1.

were celebrating Easter on the same date, whereas the Irish Easter differed that year [631] by a month, this confirmed the southern Irish willingness to adopt the Victorian system. The rest of Ireland, however, did not conform till later in the century – and then to the Alexandrian system, which the papacy had meanwhile adopted. Churches belonging to the Columban (Iona) federation did not conform until 716. Much of the seventh century was therefore marked by the controversy, and separate synods were attended by members of the rival 'Roman' and 'Irish' factions. Their differently shaped tonsures – a way of cutting the hair that served as a badge of clerical and monastic status – were a visible sign of their 'Roman' or 'Irish' allegiance. Further, the two groups probably differed in their exegetical methods and approach.⁹³

The Easter controversy was important for its repercussions. The issue is confusing, because sometimes it was treated simply as a case of unfortunate divergence; but sometimes, as in England after Theodore's arrival in 669, adherents of the 'Celtic' Easter found themselves labelled as heretics and schismatics, whose sacraments were denied validity. In an Irish context, the issue was important because it raised the question of how far Ireland needed to conform to continental practices, or alternatively could be allowed to develop its own customs.⁹⁴ Although conformity on Easter was eventually achieved, in certain respects the Irish church continued to develop its own synthesis with Irish law,⁹⁵ and to evolve rather differently in organisational terms. The controversy also posed the linked questions of how decisions should be reached, and where authority should lie.⁹⁶ One can perhaps see amongst the Irish a readiness to seek the answer in scriptural exegesis and in discussion in synods, rather than in decisions reached by those in positions of authority as office-holders, i.e. as bishops or popes.⁹⁷ Yet the eighty-four-year-cycle adherents were sometimes as ready to appeal to authorities as the Roman party. It is just that their authorities were highly regarded because of their closeness to God, holiness of life and exegetical skill, rather than because of their office within the church.⁹⁸ Thus, what the Easter controversy in Ireland also brings out is their different understanding from the continental church as to where authority within the church lay. This helps to explain why the Irish traditionalists do not seem to have felt the need for an ecclesiastical hierarchy headed by a single leader for the Irish church as a whole. However, the Easter controversy and

⁹³ Ó Néill (1984); cf. Sharpe (1992b), pp. 44–5; Charles-Edwards (2000), ch. 9, esp. pp. 396–405, 411–15.

⁹⁴ Columbanus, *Epistulae* III.2–3. Cf. Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 391 and n. 1.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ó Corráin (1984); Mac Niocaill (1984). ⁹⁶ Cf. Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 411–15.

⁹⁷ Columbanus, *Epistulae* II.3–5, 7–8; *Epistulae* V.10–12. Cf. Charles-Edwards (2000), Hughes (1987), no. xv, pp. 6–17; pp. 274–7; Sheehy (1987).

⁹⁸ Columbanus, *Epistulae* I.5; Bede, *HE* III.25; Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi* c.10. Cf. Stancliffe (1999), pp. 131–3.

the accompanying links with the continental church introduced such hierarchical concepts to the circles of Irish *Romani*; and the churches of Kildare and then Armagh soon realised that these ideas could be harnessed to their own advantage.

QUESTIONS OF ORGANISATION

The organisation of the early Irish church is a complex, but important topic. It differed in a few, intriguing, respects from the organisation of the church elsewhere at the time – and, indeed, since. Unfortunately, however, the evidence is all too slender, patchy in its incidence, and difficult to interpret, which explains why it has recently aroused scholarly controversy.⁹⁹

One underlying reason was the shifting nature of political power in Ireland, and the lack of a fixed framework and single overarching hierarchy such as the Roman imperial structure had provided on the continent. For instance in seventh-century Leinster the provincial over kingship passed from the Uí Cheinnselaig south of the Wicklow mountains to the Uí Dúnlainge and the Uí Máil, neighbours and rivals to the north-west of the mountains. Such dynastic and geographical shifts occurred frequently at every level of Irish over kingship, and this made it difficult to establish a stable ecclesiastical hierarchy of the type found on the continent, where the bishop of the (fixed) capital city of a province was always the metropolitan bishop. In turn, the over king of Leinster would have seen himself as on the same level as the other provincial over kings. There was thus no agreed leader amongst the provinces, and so no basis for any one church to win recognition as the leading church in Ireland.

When we turn to the structure of society into which churchmen had to be slotted, we discover intriguing differences there also. Society was certainly hierarchical; but parallel to the ordinary lay hierarchy, which ran from the farmer at the bottom up through the grades of nobility to the king at the top, there were also separate hierarchies for men of learning. It looks as though the latter provided the model for accommodating churchmen; and Irish law tracts disclose not a *single* ecclesiastical hierarchy based on clerical orders, but rather *three, parallel* ecclesiastical hierarchies. First, there was a hierarchy of clerical orders running from the lowly doorkeeper up via the exorcist, lector, subdeacon, deacon and priest, to the bishop at the top. Secondly, there was a hierarchy of Christian scholars running from the one who simply knew his psalms up through those who had greater and greater knowledge, which culminated at the top in the master ecclesiastical scholar. Thirdly, there was a hierarchy of

⁹⁹ Initiated by Sharpe (1984b).

church officers running from the miller or suchlike at the bottom up to the *airchinnech*, the 'erenagh' or church head (Latin *princeps*) at the top.¹⁰⁰ Thus, whereas on the continent the bishop was the single head of the church in his diocese, responsible for teaching and safeguarding the faith and for controlling the church's wealth, in Ireland his functions might be divided. An individual could, of course, be both an ordained bishop and a highly trained scholar, or bishop and church head; but often the roles were separate. In terms of status, it meant that several leaders or experts in their special fields ranked on the same level as the *túath* king and chief poet: bishops, master ecclesiastical scholars, heads of the more important churches,¹⁰¹ and also the most highly regarded anchorites – though even the lawyers did not construct a sevenfold hierarchy of holiness!

That, at least, is a somewhat schematised portrayal of the status of churchmen as it had evolved by the late seventh century. Let us now go back to the earliest period for which we have evidence. The decrees of the 'First Synod of Patrick' show the church – including its wealth – under the control of bishops; and the individual bishop's sphere of jurisdiction was the *plebs*, 'people', which should almost certainly be equated with the *túath*.¹⁰² We should therefore envisage each *túath* forming a little diocese of its own, with its episcopal mother-church. Within the *túath* there were also small churches, many of them family churches, served by a single priest. In theory, at least, these were supervised by the bishop of the *túath*. By the late seventh century there was a surprisingly dense network of such lesser churches.¹⁰³

At the same time, however, the sixth and seventh centuries saw a wave of ascetic and monastic enthusiasm; and, as we have seen, this resulted in the foundation of several monasteries. We should remember that holy men, rather than bishops, have always tended to attract lay piety. The layman's concern was to engage the intercession of one whose prayers on his behalf would carry weight with God. An ascetic monk like St Cainnech fitted the bill far better than the well-fed head of the local episcopal church, as a story in the *Life of St Cainnech* implies.¹⁰⁴ Further, because such monasteries were sometimes less closely tied to the ruling dynasty of a specific people than was the original episcopal church,

¹⁰⁰ Breatnach (1987), pp. 84–5, where minor variations are detailed; cf. Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 124–36, 264–77, esp. pp. 267–71, 276–7; Picard (2000); see also the following note. Compare the continental organisation, Scheibelreiter, chapter 25 below.

¹⁰¹ See Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 132–3, 267: by no means every church head attained such high status.

¹⁰² *First Synod of St Patrick* 1, 4, 5, 23–7, 30 (for the date, see n. 27 above); cf. Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 247–50.

¹⁰³ 'Rule of Patrick', esp. 11–16; Ó Corráin (1981), pp. 336–40; Sharpe (1984b), pp. 254–9; (1992a), pp. 86–109.

¹⁰⁴ Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 262–4; cf. Doherty (1991), p. 65.

they might attract support from a greater number of patrons. This applied particularly to churches founded in border 'no man's land' areas, or in an insignificant (and so unthreatening) *túath*. Clonmacnois, in the unimportant kingdom of Delbnae Bethra, is a good example. It lay beside the River Shannon, which marked the boundary between Connacht and the southern Uí Néill spheres of authority, and was able to attract patronage from both.¹⁰⁵ Monasteries could thus be endowed with gifts of land that lay in other *túatha*; and when we also recall that monasteries founded by the same founder-saint could form a federation of churches under the leadership of the church where the founder-saint was buried, we begin to see how they came to eclipse the older, free-standing episcopal churches in power and wealth. Further contributory factors were that the episcopal churches in Ireland had small dioceses, and none of the status and authority that came to bishops on the continent because of political and social circumstances there. The way in which an old episcopal church could in Ireland find itself outclassed by a nearby monastery is illustrated by Tírechán describing the old church of the Corcu Saí as 'Domnach Sáirigi, next to Duleek'. Although an ancient church, and originally the chief church of the Corcu Saí, by the late seventh century it was apparently so obscure that its location was described in relation to the more recent and more famous monastery of Duleek.¹⁰⁶

On the continent, bishops did their utmost to ensure that they retained control over all in their diocese, including hermits and monasteries. Monks were explicitly placed under the jurisdiction of their diocesan bishop at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and this ruling was re-enacted by synods in Spain and Gaul.¹⁰⁷ However, there is no sign of corresponding canons from Ireland. On the contrary, where a Frankish synod insists that no monk should leave his monastery and found a cell 'without the permission of the bishop and the agreement of his abbot', the same ruling occurs in the Irish collection of canons with a significant difference: the monk now only needs 'the permission of his abbot'.¹⁰⁸ Since both Columbanus and Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* bear out the significance of the abbot's permission, while omitting any reference to the bishop, it looks as though monastic founders in Ireland were never subject to the bishop's authority.¹⁰⁹ It is true that the eighth- or ninth-century 'Rule of Patrick' assigns the bishop the role of acting as spiritual adviser to rulers and erenaghs, and also to clergy in his *túath*; and this has been seen as

¹⁰⁵ Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 26, and cf. p. 257.

¹⁰⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea* c.27. See Doherty (1991), esp. pp. 54, 60–1, 65–6, 73–5.

¹⁰⁷ Bittermann (1938), esp. p. 200, n. 8; cf. Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* viii.15.

¹⁰⁸ 1 Orléans (AD 511), canon 22: ed. Gaudemet and Basdevant 1 (1989), p. 84; *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* xxxix.16.

¹⁰⁹ Columbanus, *Epistulae* 1.7; Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.6.

indicating the bishop's influence over the monastic church.¹¹⁰ However, this text probably emanates from Armagh, which was keen to uphold the continuing rights of *túath* episcopal churches.¹¹¹ There is no supporting evidence that the heads of important monasteries ever accepted its claims; and the evidence from Columbanus' monasteries on the continent as well as from Bede's account of Iona points rather to the view that the diocesan bishops were not recognised as having rights of supervision and control over Irish monasteries.¹¹² This is also borne out by Adomnán's story about a Hebridean abbot summoning a bishop and compelling him to ordain an unworthy candidate to the priesthood, in flagrant disregard of the provisions of the 'Rule of Patrick'. We should further note that the abbot was visited by divine punishment, not episcopal correction.¹¹³

At this point the relevance of our earlier discussion about parallel church hierarchies should be apparent; for alongside the ordinary *túath* bishop, and enjoying the same status, ranked the heads of major churches. So, for instance, the head of the federation of Columban monasteries was the abbot of Iona; and this meant that he ranked on the same level as a *túath* bishop, although in terms of ecclesiastical orders he was only a priest. What is more, we know that the priest-abbot of Iona was responsible for appointing priors to the monasteries under his control in Ireland and Dál Riada, and also for choosing bishops for Northumbria until the Synod of Whitby. The bishops appointed by the abbot were under the abbot's authority; and so, for instance, Aidan, Finan and Colman had to keep to the Easter reckoning in use on Iona; they were not free to adopt the Roman system of reckoning, even if they had wanted to.¹¹⁴

As regards the question of how the church was able to reach decisions when authority was dispersed, the answer appears to have been the synod. This enabled representation from all major churches in an area, whether episcopal or monastic in origin; and it also allowed for the coming together of bishops, church heads, ecclesiastical scholars and anchorites.¹¹⁵ Ideally, issues should be discussed with regard to the principles discernible in Scripture, or failing that, in patristic texts, earlier canons and the examples of the saints; and, ideally, general agreement was reached.¹¹⁶ Indeed, since synods were church affairs, and their decisions were not enforced by kings,¹¹⁷ agreement, even if it was only agreement to differ, was the only way forward. In the seventh century,

¹¹⁰ 'Rule of Patrick' 1, 6–7. Sharpe (1984b), p. 253; cf. Charles-Edwards (1992), p. 75.

¹¹¹ Cf. Charles-Edwards (1992), pp. 69–75; Doherty (1991), pp. 61–6, 73–9.

¹¹² Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 11.23 and Stancliffe (2001), pp. 201–2, 207–8, 212–16, 219. Bede, *HE* III.4; Stancliffe, below p. 456.

¹¹³ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 1.36; cf. 'Rule of Patrick', 3. ¹¹⁴ Bede, *HE* III.4 and 25.

¹¹⁵ Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 274–81. ¹¹⁶ Ó Cróinín (1995), pp. 152–3.

¹¹⁷ For the exception to this rule, see Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 280–1.

however, the repercussions of the Easter controversy led to a division between those who thought that recourse should be had to Rome, if agreement could not be reached within Ireland, and those who continued to favour discussion in Irish synods rather than recourse to such external authority.

Controversy and closer links to the continent provided a forcing ground for the development of ideas of ecclesiastical organisation in Ireland. By the late seventh century we have evidence for three *different* types of organisational structure above the *túath* level. The first type is hierarchical, and is embodied in the claim that one Irish church was the head of all the other churches in Ireland. First Kildare claimed that its jurisdiction (*parroechia*) spread throughout Ireland, 'from sea to sea', although it did not spell out how this would affect other churches.¹¹⁸ Then, later in the seventh century, Armagh in its turn claimed supremacy throughout Ireland. This may have been in response not just to Kildare but also to Northumbrian pretensions to ecclesiastical overlordship over northern Ireland, with Northumbria opportunistically seizing upon northern Ireland's non-conformity to the Roman Easter.¹¹⁹ Armagh's claims, made in the *Liber Angeli* ('Book of the Angel'), were coherently expressed and far more concrete than Kildare's. The basis of its claim was that because St Patrick had converted all the Irish, and because Armagh was his special church, therefore God had assigned all the tribes of the Irish to the jurisdiction (*paruchia*) of Patrick/Armagh. Other, independent churches are represented as secondary, and owe their position to Patrick's generosity in sharing all that God has given him. Patrick/Armagh, however, retained various specific rights, including superior status to all other churches within Ireland and appellate jurisdiction, with appeal allowed only to Rome; it also claimed a special relationship with all the original episcopal and *domnach* churches, together with an invitation to all monks to abandon their own monasteries and join Patrick. Here, then, we see a truly hierarchical conception of the Irish church, with the archbishop of Armagh at the apex of that hierarchy, and other churches assigned a lesser status.

The second type of organisational structure is the grouping together of *túatha* into small-scale provinces. In fact, according to one canon attributed to a *Romani* synod, there was quite an ecclesiastical hierarchy: it is implied that not only would there be a metropolitan bishop of the small-scale province, covering perhaps four *túatha*, but that there was also a higher grade of bishop above him, probably at the level of the major overkingdoms (confusingly also known as 'provinces') like Leinster or Munster.¹²⁰ The details need not concern

¹¹⁸ Cogitosus, *Vita Brigitae*, preface. ¹¹⁹ Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 429–38.

¹²⁰ *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* xx, as interpreted by Charles-Edwards (1992), pp. 65–6, 72 n. 50, and (2000), pp. 126, 423–6.

us; we can content ourselves simply with noting that these canons do seem to imply an ecclesiastical structure similar to that found on the continent, using the political structures of overkingdoms as ecclesiastical provinces. The result would be a small number of over-overbishops of equal status, rather than a single head of the church in Ireland.

The third type of organisational structure implied by our sources is very different: *Tírechán* shows various major churches competing with each other in an attempt to claim that individual churches should in some sense be subject to them, or federated to them.¹²¹ The basis for this claim was often the accepted principle (operative also in *Liber Angeli*) that all churches established by the same founder-saint or his heir should be grouped together as his *paruchia*, i.e. under his jurisdiction. Ambitious monasteries would then claim that a disputed church had really been established by their own founder, or by one of his monks. This was partially, but not entirely, a matter of the more powerful churches forcibly subjugating smaller ones. A more subtle approach was favoured by Armagh, which sought to woo episcopal and *domnach* churches by offering them an honourable relationship and scope to continue to choose their own head, rather than imposing an Armagh nominee.¹²² Sometimes, at least, churches felt that it was in their interests to accept Armagh's invitation. A classic case is the decision of the episcopal church of Sletty, the chief church of the *Uí Bairrche* in southern Leinster – a *túath* of middling importance by the late seventh century – to put itself under Armagh. This is generally interpreted as a pre-emptive move to prevent itself from being forcibly taken over by Kildare.¹²³ But, however established, the end result was the growth of several federations of churches, or *paruchiae*, the most important being those headed by the greatest churches like Armagh or Clonmacnois. Sometimes, as with Sletty and Armagh, not all members of a *paruchia* belonged to the same province as their head church. One can envisage the mapping of these rival federations as a patchwork quilt, with all the churches marked in one colour belonging (say) to the Columban federation, those in another to (say) Armagh, and so on. Unfortunately, however, any such map would be woefully inadequate owing to gaps in our evidence, and to some churches being disputed between rival claimants.

By this stage, the reader's head will be spinning. How could Kildare and Armagh both claim to be the supreme church in Ireland? How can either of their claims be harmonised with the evidence for Ireland containing a provincial structure where there was no single supreme bishop of all Ireland, but rather

¹²¹ For example, *Tírechán*, *Collectanea* cc. 7, 22, 25, 47.4–48. Cf. Charles-Edwards (1984), pp. 167–9; Doherty (1991), pp. 62–4. Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 250–7.

¹²² *Additamenta* 9; Doherty (1991), pp. 73–81. ¹²³ *Additamenta* 16; Doherty (1991), pp. 75–8.

one overbishop for each main political overkingdom within Ireland? Further, does not the evidence for individual churches building up federations, which might include churches in a different overkingdom, contradict the provincial model?

Some of these problems can be speedily resolved. First, although both Kildare and Armagh *claimed* to be the supreme church in Ireland, the assertions of Cogitosus and the *Liber Angeli* are evidence of claims made: not of their claims being accepted. On the contrary, *Liber Angeli* is explicit evidence that Armagh refused to accept Kildare's claim; and Tírechán, although writing on behalf of Armagh, openly admits that other churches in Ireland refused to accept its claims.¹²⁴ Confirmation that no single church in Ireland was widely recognised as being of superior status can be found in the absence of any citations to that effect in the Irish canonical collection.¹²⁵ This, however, does not preclude the likelihood that Armagh was recognised as the first among equals by the late seventh century, even in Munster.¹²⁶

Until recently, the confusing and sometimes contradictory rulings about ecclesiastical provinces in the Irish canonical collection were also dismissed as belonging to the realm of aspiration, not actuality. They are mostly ascribed to synods of the Roman party, and have been seen as reflecting a failed attempt by the *Romani* to impose a continental, hierarchical structure on the Irish church.¹²⁷ Recently, however, attention has been drawn to various pieces of evidence which suggest that these canons should be taken seriously. For instance, some Irish texts refer to a 'bishop of bishops', or 'supreme noble bishop', implying that different rankings of bishops did indeed exist.¹²⁸ Even more interesting are later annalistic obits recording some individuals who were bishops of an area covering more than one *túath*, sometimes a province. However, the role of 'overbishop' of a province was not tied to a specific church, as on the continent; so, for instance, both Máel-Móedhóc of Killeslin (d. 917) and Anmchad of Kildare (d. 981) are recorded as archbishop or bishop of Leinster.¹²⁹ Unfortunately we do not know whether such 'overbishops' had a fixed role in a hierarchical structure, or whether the titles were bestowed on individuals as a personal honour.¹³⁰ Such uncertainties make it difficult to know whether a

¹²⁴ *Liber Angeli*, esp. 32; Tírechán, *Collectanea* c.18.

¹²⁵ I here follow Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 424–6; for a contrary view, Etchingham (1999), pp. 155, 160–1.

¹²⁶ Sharpe (1984c), p. 66; Breatnach (1986), pp. 49–51; Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 426.

¹²⁷ Sharpe (1984c), pp. 67–8.

¹²⁸ Etchingham (1999), pp. 72, 156, 162; Charles-Edwards (2000), p. 259.

¹²⁹ Etchingham (1999), pp. 177–88; Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 260–1. These show that such titles belonged to individuals, rather than to a fixed church, much as the provincial overkingship could also rotate.

¹³⁰ Cf. Davies (1992), p. 14.

coherent system of provincial church organisation, with a hierarchy of levels, did in fact win general acceptance.

As regards the third type of organisational structure, the federations or *paruchia*e, the evidence for these, at least, is convincing. Two further points should be made about the workings of such federations. First, although dependent churches could be affiliated to a church in a different overkingdom, we should not regard this as common. The greatest churches, like Armagh, Kildare and Iona, did indeed have widely scattered churches under them. However, it was commoner for the majority of dependent churches to be in the neighbourhood of the dominant church, as, for instance, with the cluster of churches affiliated to Cork.¹³¹ Often, then, the ties of province and the ties binding together a federation of churches will have reinforced each other. Secondly, we must not assume that whenever a lesser church became in some way linked to a federation headed by a more powerful church it necessarily lost its own identity. It so happens that some of our best evidence for the operation of a federation of churches concerns Iona; and the abbot of Iona did indeed direct the whole as one community (*familia*), appointing priors and transferring monks from one monastery to another.¹³² Iona, however, may well have been unusual in this degree of centralisation; and, most of the time, when one church came to 'hold' a lesser church, we should think of the relationship as essentially an economic one. The lesser church would owe some form of tribute, whether this was a symbolic trifle, or an economic burden; but it would generally retain its own status. Thus an episcopal church could become subject to a monastery, but remain the episcopal church for the *túath* it served – though not in every case.¹³³

In conclusion, we may say that the Irish church did have a form of episcopal organisation, and of groupings into provinces. Cutting across this structure, however, was the position of the most powerful monasteries, which seem never to have been effectively controlled by bishops; and this, combined with the fact that their heads were of the same status as bishops, had many churches within their *paruchia*e and controlled the resources of those churches,¹³⁴ meant that these heads were on a par with the most powerful people in the early Irish church. Thus in 700 Armagh's power in practice rested upon its prestige, lands, the number of churches federated to it and the support it could attract from kings, rather than on the grandiose claims put forward in *Liber Angeli*; and

¹³¹ Hurley (1982), pp. 304–5, 321–3.

¹³² MacDonald (1985), esp. pp. 184–5; Herbert (1988), pp. 31–5.

¹³³ Hurley (1982), pp. 321–4; Sharpe (1984b), pp. 243–7; (1992a), pp. 97–100, 105–6; Charles-Edwards (2000), pp. 251–7; cf. Charles-Edwards (1989), p. 36.

¹³⁴ Sharpe (1984b), pp. 263–4.

in 700 Adomnán, scholar, head of the Columban federation and – crucially – fourth cousin of the Uí Néill overking, was probably more influential than the bishop who headed the Armagh federation. His achievement at the synod of Birr in 698 testifies to this. Here, he succeeded in promoting a law protecting clerics, women and children from warfare; and this was guaranteed by mustering dozens of kings and high-ranking churchmen to support it, led by the bishop of Armagh.¹³⁵ This illustrates the potential scope for a great abbot to provide leadership within the early Irish church.

¹³⁵ Ní Dhonnchadha (1995).